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## **Experience Corps in Urban Elementary Schools: A Survey of Principals**

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January 2004

## **SUMMARY**

Principals, coping with the press of ever-rising academic expectations and constant administrative challenges, have no time for programs that do not serve their purposes. Experience Corps – which places teams of older adults as tutors and mentors in urban elementary schools – has won their allegiance and respect. A survey of principals in whose schools the program operated in 2002-2003 shows that:

- Principals believe it has contributed to their students' academic performance.
- Principals cite the personal relationships between Experience Corps members and students, and between members and teachers, as contributing to a positive school atmosphere.
- In comparison with other programs, principals cite not only Experience Corps' advantage of intergenerational benefits, but also the advantages of the reliability of members and the coordination provided by the local office.

## **BACKGROUND: THE EXPERIENCE CORPS PROGRAM AND THIS SURVEY**

Experience Corps aims to boost children's academic performance and to yield a wide array of other benefits for children, teachers, classrooms, and the school as a whole. Since 1995, when services began in a handful of schools on a pilot basis, Experience Corps has placed teams of older adults in an ever-growing number of schools. In 2002-03, the Experience Corps program operated in 12 cities.

With further expansion planned, the Experience Corps leadership wanted to know how the program's services are viewed in participating schools. Although informal reports from principals have long attested to the program's perceived value, program leaders wanted a more systematic assessment of the specific program strengths and contributions that principals would report. Thus, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) undertook a survey of all the principals in elementary schools that participated in 2002-03. PSA is an independent research and evaluation organization specializing in studies of education improvement.

The survey was designed to capture principals' observations and perceptions as a useful source of information for those who want to know what educators see when Experience Corps operates in their schools. It went to a group of respondents who could reflect on the program's operations and results over the whole previous academic year if not longer: the principals of all the elementary schools participating in 2002-03 who could be reached in fall 2003. Despite the press of other tasks in the early months of the 2003-04 school year, 67 percent of the principals filled out and returned their surveys (city-by-city numbers of principals and respondents appear in the appendix). In addition, two principals participated in telephone interviews in which they elaborated on their thoughts about the program.

## **OVERALL QUALITY AND DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM**

Asked for an overall rating of their satisfaction with the services that Experience Corps provided, 74 percent of principals chose the response “extremely satisfied” and an additional 25 percent chose “satisfied.” This very high rating did not vary by city; principals across the board were resoundingly pleased with the program.

Most commonly, Experience Corps members provided individual tutoring for students in these schools (Table 1). Majorities of the principals also reported each of three other types of services: literacy activities, small-group tutoring, and student mentoring. About one-third also reported classroom management and support; a smaller number reported parent outreach.

## **BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS**

At the heart of this inquiry were questions about the ways in which principals believe Experience Corps affects students. In reviewing these findings, readers should bear in mind that this study did not undertake a rigorous, independent investigation of program outcomes or impact. Instead, it simply asked principals what types of benefits they have observed.

Principals with Experience Corps programs in their schools overwhelmingly reported benefits for students, and they particularly focused on the academic realm (Table 2 and Figure 1). Academic performance emerged as the area of greatest benefit for students, with 60 percent reporting “very much” benefit in this area and another 30 percent reporting “quite a bit” of benefit. Students’ readiness to learn was also perceived to have improved, with 48 percent of principals reporting very much benefit in this area and almost as many, 42 percent, reporting “quite a bit” of benefit. A principal’s comments in a telephone interview illustrate the dynamics by which Experience Corps can affect readiness to learn: “The kids don’t want their tutors to hear bad things about them, so they make sure they are doing their class work and everything else they need to do,” she said.

Outcomes related to students’ classroom actions—including attendance, behavior, and classroom participation—were also widely viewed as areas of benefit. However, in these areas the principals who reported “very much” benefit were outnumbered by those giving the milder endorsement of “quite a bit” of benefit.

When asked specifically about students’ attitudes that might have improved through participation in Experience Corps (Table 3), principals focused on students’ attitudes toward older adults, which were

**Figure 1**  
**Percent of Principals Who Reported the Experience Corps Program**  
**Benefited Students "Very Much" or "Quite a Bit"**  
**in the 2002-03 School Year**

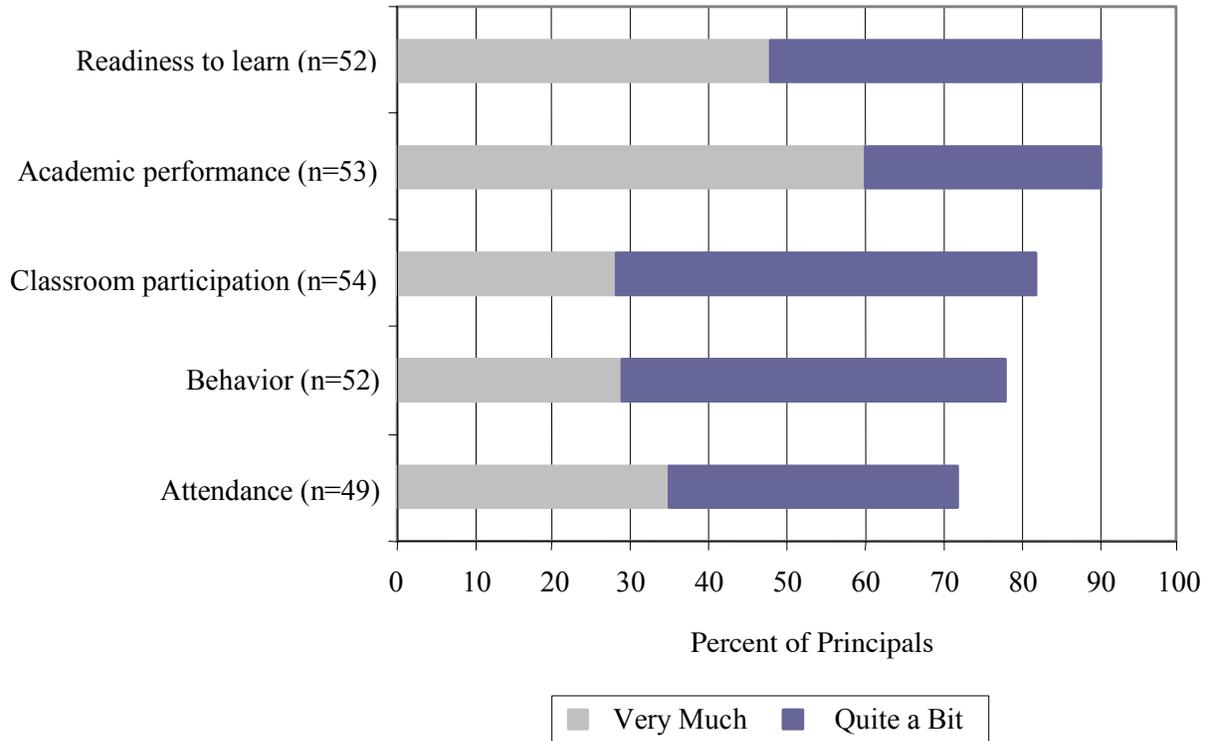


Figure reads: Ninety percent of principals reported that the Experience Corps program improved students readiness to learn "very much" or "quite a bit." (For all numbers, see Table 2)

reported to have improved "very much" by 73 percent of principals. As a principal described the relationship: "Some volunteers will talk to children about their social life and experience like grandparents. It is a valuable support. The emotional part is very important. Some of the students don't have grandparents that will talk to them." Many principals (55 percent) also reported "very much" improvement in students' self-confidence.

A few principals wrote comments on their surveys. In these responses, some principals mentioned students' improved psychosocial development. Principals said the volunteers provided students with someone to talk to, developed friendships, and helped to improve students' self-esteem and self-confidence. Additionally, they said the volunteers were patient with the students and were a source of motivation. Other benefits mentioned revolved around improvements in the overall school atmosphere for students, including bonding, school pride, and a positive school climate.

## BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS

The presence of older adults in a school can potentially offer a variety of advantages for teachers, and principals were asked to assess the extent to which they had observed these results (Table 4 and Figure 2). Again, the responding principals focused most intensely on the academic domain. Fifty-two percent reported “very much” benefit in the area of support for attainment of academic standards, and an additional 39 percent observed “quite a bit” of benefit in this area, for a total of 91 percent.

Both of the principals who were interviewed made comments that illustrate how teachers’ appreciation of the program is linked to its perceived academic benefits. One principal said: “When [teachers] have a struggling child, they know there is someone who can give them the help they need. And, it is not embarrassing to the child to get the help. [The Experience Corps members] are very non-threatening.

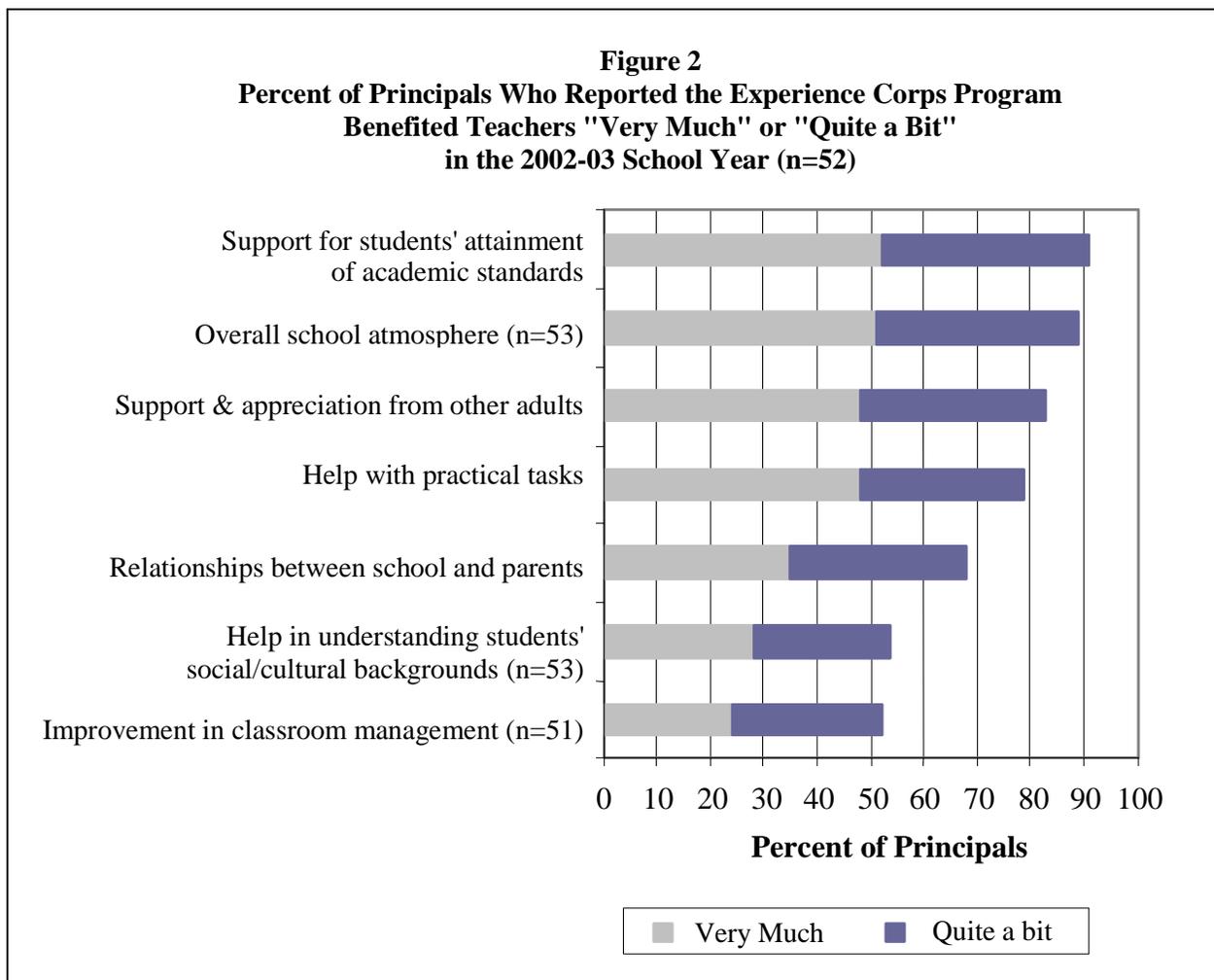


Figure reads: Ninety-one percent of principals reported that the Experience Corps program benefited teachers “very much” or “quite a bit” by providing support for students’ attainment of academic standards. (For all numbers, see Table 4)

Sometimes the volunteers can pick up things that I, or teachers in a class of 25, can't find out. Once we see a problem, we can try to give them they help they need." Similarly, the other principal said of the Experience Corps members: "The teachers count on them every year and welcome their return... They help out very well. It's one of the reasons for the higher academic performance over the past few years."

Other areas of benefit for teachers that were reported by large numbers of principals included overall school atmosphere, support and appreciation from other adults, and help with practical tasks. In somewhat fewer cases, principals said they had observed benefits for teachers accruing from the relationship between the school and parents, or from help in understanding students' social or cultural backgrounds. A smaller number of principals claimed improvements in classroom management.

### **SATISFACTION WITH SPECIFIC PROGRAM FEATURES**

From principals' perspective, the most distinctively positive features of Experience Corps were found in the members themselves: the members' reliability was reported as a strength of the program by 87 percent of principals, and the intergenerational benefits of their presence in the school by 83 percent of principals (Table 5 and Figure 3). These findings came from a question designed to identify specific aspects of Experience Corps operations that contribute to principals' satisfaction, as well as to find areas for possible improvement, by asking principals to compare the program with others that have brought volunteers into their school. In response to this question, 73 percent of principals also cited their local office as a comparative strength of the Experience Corps program, and 69 percent cited the team structure.

Both of the principals who were interviewed pointed to the members as the reason why the Experience Corps program is better than other volunteer programs in their schools. One said, "These senior citizens come in sometimes with more dedication than some people on the payroll. They will try anything and will work with the teachers. They are very consistent. They are here with the students every day. Volunteers in other programs may start off that way, but they eventually fade away." Similarly, the other principal commented: "Older volunteers have more experience. They are consistent and better at finding solutions. They are very mellow."

One of these principals also praised the arrangements for site coordination, saying that having a program coordinator onsite or nearby helps with program administration. In her school, a retired teacher serves as an onsite coordinator, assigns the volunteers, finds substitutes if needed, and deals with administrative issues. That coordinator reports to a program coordinator at the Experience Corps office in the city.

Previously, if problems arose, the principal would have to deal with each of the volunteers. However, the onsite coordinator has improved things. “It’s not that I didn’t like dealing with the 10 people, but it just wasn’t the most efficient use of time,” the principal commented.

The training and expertise of Experience Corps members generally showed less comparative advantage over other programs, when viewed in the context of the highly positive comments that principals offered on other aspects of Experience Corps operations and structure. Just over half of all respondents called Experience Corps “better than other programs” in the training provided to members. Similarly, while just over half of all respondents rated the members’ knowledge and skills in working with students as better than volunteers from other programs, nearly the same proportion rated these qualities as “similar to other programs.”

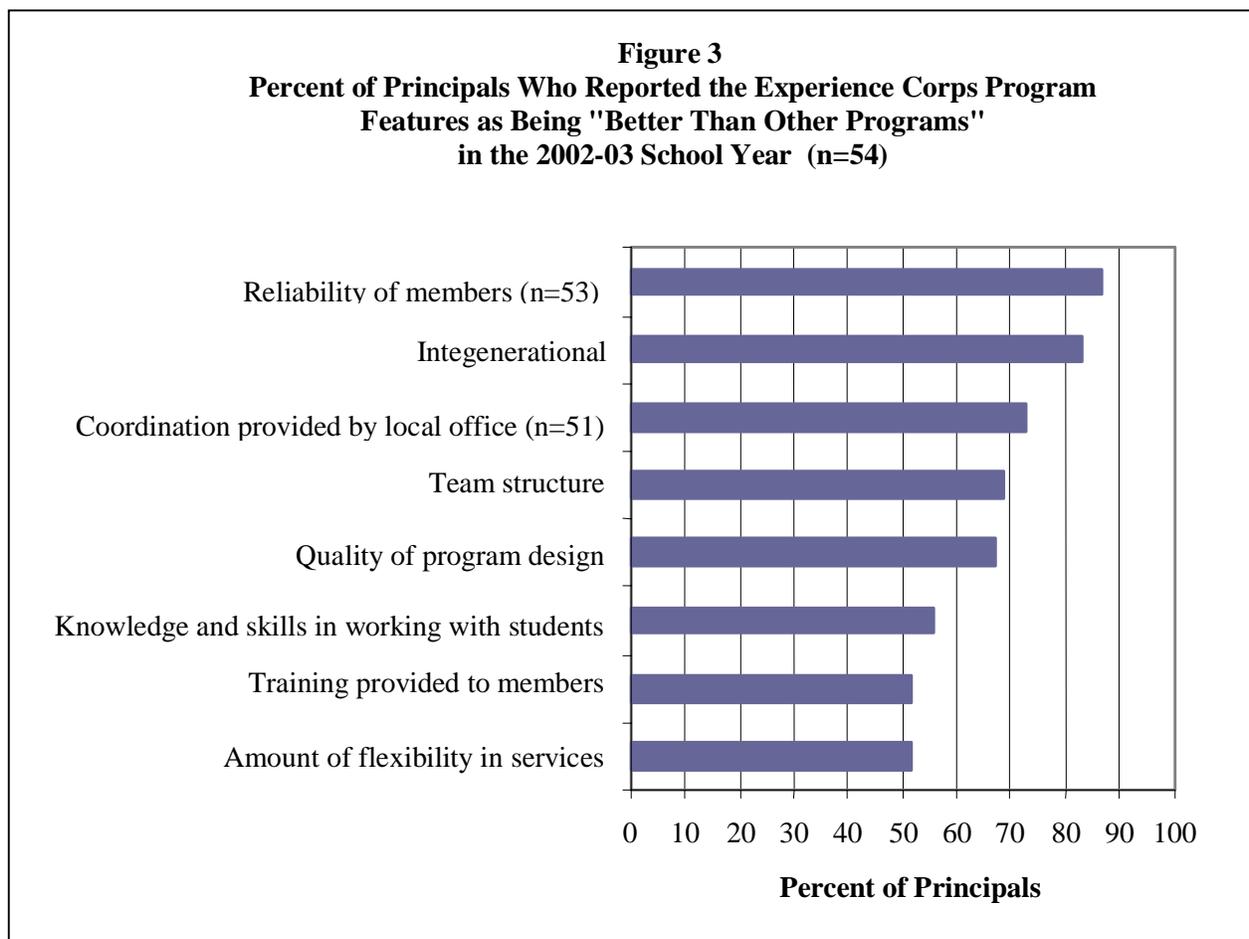


Figure reads: Eighty-seven percent of principals reported that the Experience Corps program was “better than other programs” in the reliability of members. (For all numbers, see Table 5)

## **LOOKING AHEAD: IMPLICATIONS**

As the program expands, its leaders can confidently assert that the Experience Corps members and site coordinators have earned principals' trust for their reliability. The program receives strikingly high ratings for overall satisfaction, and principals compare it favorably with other programs that have brought volunteers into their schools. In particular, they praise the members and the system of coordination.

As Experience Corps moves forward with research, learning more about the program's academic effects will clearly be a high priority. Principals' comments about the significant benefits to students and teachers suggest that the program might provide crucial support for academic achievement in the form of extra eyes and ears that focus on children's progress, and a reliable person who can signal the need for additional skilled help.

**Table 1**  
**Types of Program Support Reported in Schools**

<b>What kind of support did the program provide to your school?</b>	
	<u>Percent of Principals (n=54)</u>
One-on-one tutoring	94
Literacy activities	65
Small group tutoring	62
Student mentoring	57
Classroom management and support	32
Parent outreach	19
Other	9

Table reads: Of 54 principals responding, 94 percent reported that Experience Corps provided one-on-one tutoring in their schools.

**Table 2**  
**How Principals Reported That the Experience Corps Program Benefited Students**

<b>From your observation, to what extent did the program provide benefits to participating students in each of the following areas?</b>					
	<u>Percent of Principals</u>				
	<u>Very Much</u>	<u>Quite a Bit</u>	<u>Just Some</u>	<u>Little or None</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
Academic performance (n=53)	60	30	4	2	4
Readiness to learn (n=52)	48	42	6	2	2
Attendance (n=49)	35	37	12	6	10
Behavior (n=52)	29	49	14	6	4
Classroom participation (n=54)	28	54	6	4	9

Table reads: Sixty percent of the principals who responded indicated the Experience Corps program benefited students' academic performance "very much."

**Table 3**

**How Principals Reported That the Experience Corps Program Improved Students' Attitudes**

<b>From your observation, to what extent did the program improve participating students' attitudes in each of the following areas?</b>					
	<b><u>Percent of Principals (n=51)</u></b>				
	<b><u>Very Much</u></b>	<b><u>Quite a Bit</u></b>	<b><u>Just Some</u></b>	<b><u>Little or None</u></b>	<b><u>Don't Know</u></b>
Attitude toward older adults	73	18	2	2	6
Self-confidence	55	37	4	2	2
Attitudes toward learning (n=52)	44	44	8	2	2

Table reads: Seventy-three percent of the principals who responded indicated the Experience Corps program improved students' attitudes toward older adults "very much."

**Table 4**  
**How Principals Reported That the Experience Corps Program Benefited Teachers**

<b>From your observation, to what extent did the program provide each of the following benefits to teachers?</b>					
	<u>Percent of Principals (n=52)</u>				
	<u>Very Much</u>	<u>Quite a Bit</u>	<u>Just Some</u>	<u>Little or None</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
Support for attainment of academic standards	52	39	8	2	0
Overall school atmosphere (n=53)	51	38	11	0	0
Support and appreciation from other adults	48	35	12	2	4
Help with practical tasks	48	31	14	4	4
Relationships between school and parents	35	33	21	8	4
Help in understanding students' social/cultural backgrounds (n=53)	28	26	26	9	9
Improvement in classroom management (n=51)	24	28	29	12	8

Table reads: Fifty-two percent of the principals who responded indicated the Experience Corps program benefited teachers “very much” by providing support for students’ attainment of academic standards.

**Table 5**  
**Principals' Comparison of the Experience Corps Program**  
**with Other Volunteer Programs**

<b>Please rate the following features of the Experience Corps program in comparison with other programs that have brought volunteers into your school.</b>		
	<b><u>Percent of Principals (n=54)</u></b>	
	<b><u>Better than Other Programs</u></b>	<b><u>Similar to Other Programs</u></b>
Reliability of members (n=53)	87	13
Intergenerational benefits	83	17
Coordination provided by local office (n=51)	73	28
Team structure	69	32
Quality of program design	67	33
Knowledge and skills in working with students	56	43
Training provided to members	52	46
Amount of flexibility in services offered	52	44

Table reads: Eighty-seven percent of the principals who responded indicated the Experience Corps program was “better than other programs” in the reliability of members.

## Appendix

### Elementary Schools Participating in Experience Corps, and Principals Responding to the Policy Studies Associates Survey

<b>Experience Corps Principal Survey Overview</b>			
	<b>Number of Elementary Schools Participating, <u>2002-03</u></b>	<b>Number of Principals <u>Responding</u></b>	<b>Percent of Principals <u>Responding</u></b>
Philadelphia, PA	13	6	46
New York, NY	12	4	33
Minneapolis, MN	11	11	100
Cleveland, OH	10	8	80
Baltimore, MD	6	5	83
Washington, DC	6	4	67
Boston, MA	6	3	50
Port Arthur, TX	5	4	80
Kansas City, MO	4	3	75
Portland, OR	3	3	100
San Francisco, CA	3	1	33
Indianapolis, IN	2	2	100
<b>Totals</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>67</b>

Table reads: Thirteen elementary schools in Philadelphia participated in Experience Corps in 2002-03. Of the 13 principals, 6 responded to the survey, or 46 percent.